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By Jane Last

Friday September 25 2009

I NEVER thought it could snow in a desert. So imagine my astonishment when I awoke in the Navajo Desert in Utah, and saw snow gently falling outside my window. I felt blessed to have witnessed it and have been boasting about it since.

My visit to Utah also corrected another misconception. Thelma and Louise didn't drive off into the Grand Canyon close to Las Vegas -- that was in Utah too. The state has offered beautiful backdrops to many other Hollywood films such as Mission Impossible III, the recent Race To Witch Mountain, and a host of westerns.

It's in the heart of the American west, and has everything to offer to guests, from the rugged explorer to the young family looking for a holiday with a difference. It combines both desert and alpine zones, and is divided into three major landscapes: Basin and Range, the Middle Rocky Mountains and the Colorado Plateau.

Automobile

You will get a warm welcome from Utah's predominantly Mormon population -- and what they have to show does not disappoint. We travelled the length and breadth of the state in less than a week, thanks to a superb road network which is testament to America's love of the automobile.

Our first stop was to the Antelope Island State Park. With sandy white beaches, it has over 35kms of hiking and biking trails with some fantastic views of the Great Salt Lake.

Later, we drove some 385 miles to Arches National Park. The park features delicate natural sandstone arches and impossibly balanced rocks, and it's not long before you are snapping away with your camera.

But the thing about Utah is that in each park or area you visit, geological wonders and sweeping landscapes will blow you away in equal measure.

We visited the city of Moab, which is located in the southeast. It is regarded to the gateway to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Dead Horse Point State Park, the Colorado River and the La Sal Mountains.

Arches is about five miles away from Moab -- a very welcoming city with delightful eateries and micro-breweries as well as top accommodation.

Gasps could be heard the following day as our party made its way to Canyonlands National Park. This is home to a colourful landscape eroded into countless canyons, mesas and buttes by the Colorado River and its tributaries.

One of the highlights of this visit was the trip to Dead Horse State Park -- now this is where Thelma and Louise drove off.

Our final stop for that day was Goosenecks State Park -- yes another amazing geological formation that took some 300 million years to create.

Monument

It really is hard for me to pick out one highlight -- but my stay in Goulding's Lodge in Monument Valley was very special. Monument Valley, in the Navajo Desert, has provided the backdrop for countless Hollywood films, from Stagecoach starring John Wayne onwards -- and it was thanks to Harry and 'Mike' Goulding who travelled to Tinseltown in 1937 by horse and cart and set up camp in director John Ford's offices until they convinced him of Monument Valley's worth.

Apart from the comfortable accommodation they have here, there is also a museum housed in the original trading post and home of the Gouldings.

The couple were lifelong friends of the Navajo people, many of whom survived the Depression by working on movies. The Navajo are still involved in the running of Gouldings now.

The museum has preserved much of the Gouldings' home and also houses a wonderful collection of movie-making memorabilia as well as Indian artifacts.



SADDLE UP: Jane Last grabs a stetson and heads for the hills

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The night we stayed in Gouldings, our welcoming host said we would find the area quite special when we toured it. He was right. When I got up early the next morning, I saw that it was snowing in the desert, a sight that will stay with me forever.

domes

Capitol Reef National Park was next on our schedule. Interestingly, the park got its name from early explorers because its massive white sandstone domes resemble the US Capitol. Twisting canyons as well as beautiful orchards feature here.

We stopped at Bryce Canyon National Park where I hiked the Navajo Loop. I'm afraid I decided to take the harder route - and my feeble efforts (The Simpsons' Montgomery Burns springs to mind) have ensured that I go to the gym regularly ever since.

The name Bryce Canyon can be a little misleading -- the park is more of a series of impressive red rock amphitheatres and towering spires and hoodoos.

I have to give a special mention to Ruby's Inn -- after my hike, I was never in more need of a comfy bed and great food. Ruby's didn't disappoint. We were also treated to a wonderful Night Skies presentation.

Our final stop was Zion National Park -- one of the oldest and most visited outdoor attractions in Utah. It has plenty of hiking trails, for walking and horse-riding as well as beautiful scenery.

We also managed to take in Kolob Canyon for a quick 40-minute hike -- I was learning by now.

Other places we took in included the College of Eastern Utah Museum, a prehistory museum just a stone's throw from some of the world's richest archaeological, paleontological and geological wonders.

Architecture

The Edge of Cedars of State Park Museum justified another visit as it contains the remains of the Ancestral Pueblo Indian village with its unique architecture.

On our last day, we visited the Museum of the Ancients -- an interactive dinosaur museum. It's simply a must for all dino-lovers out there.

We also took in a quick visit to the Sundance Resort, owned by Hollywood legend Robert Redford. While I was hoping to bump into Mr Redford himself, I was happy to content myself with the beautiful meal and a quick drink in the specially recreated pub. It contains the same bar where the real-life Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were held up.

Apparently, Redford bought the bar, shipped it to Park City (where the resort is located) and restored it.

Redford's love affair with Utah began when he filmed the classic movie with Paul Newman, and led to him establishing the resort, which also hosts the Sundance Film Festival.

Looking at the snowy surroundings and breathtaking landscape, it's easy to see why Redford stayed. Just hope I catch him the next time . . .

Jane Last was a guest of the Utah Office of Tourism. Special thanks to Patti Denny

- Jane Last

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